

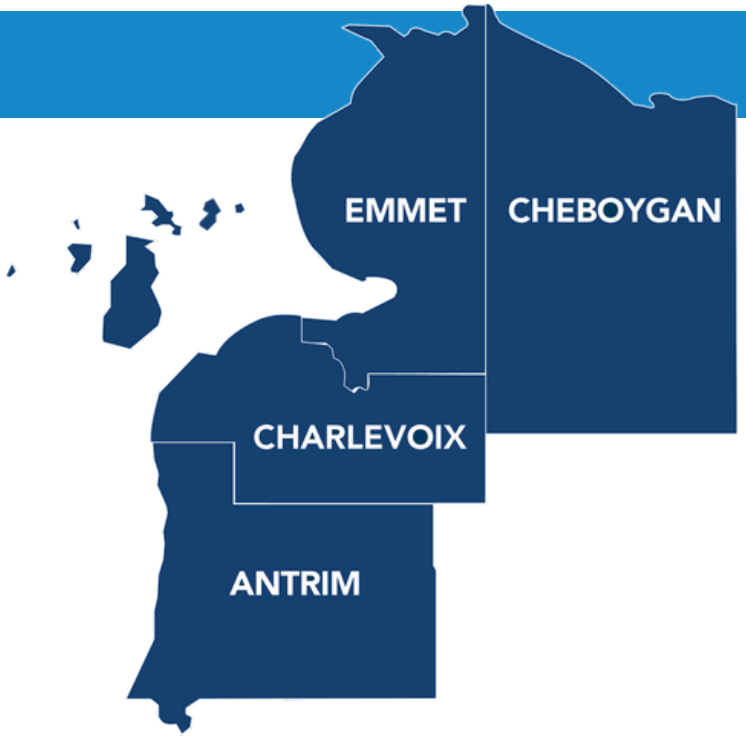
ECONOMIC PULSE

Fall 2026

Northern Lakes ECONOMIC ALLIANCE

ABOUT NLEA

Northern Lakes Economic Alliance (NLEA) is the nonprofit economic development organization serving businesses and communities across the region of Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet counties.



Mission

Our mission is to drive economic resiliency in the NLEA region by ensuring the resources, infrastructure, and policies exist to fuel business growth and community prosperity.

Strategic Priorities

Business Growth

Support businesses by reducing barriers to growth and family-supporting job creation.

Infrastructure & Development

Invest in workforce housing, mixed-use projects, infrastructure expansion, and industrial sites to meet evolving business and community needs.

Talent Retention & Attraction

Elevate career opportunities and build talent pipelines to retain and attract talent for a robust workforce.

Education & Policy

Equip local, state, and federal leaders with the tools to implement policies that support business and community investment in the region.

Why the Economic Pulse Report?

We believe data is essential for shaping effective strategies, policies, and investments that drive a stronger regional economy. The Economic Pulse Report (EPR) provides a snapshot of the latest quarterly trends, including the top economic impact issues currently on the minds of local community and business leaders.

This report is made possible by Burdco Inc. and ITC Holdings Corp.

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PROJECTS UNDERWAY

Northern Michigan businesses continue to expand their physical footprints to support their growth. New investments in redevelopment are also positioning communities to meet evolving needs. These projects represent two recent investments in the region that are creating and retaining family-supporting jobs, accelerating business growth, and advancing future housing.





Business Expansion: Royal Farms

Royal Farms in Ellsworth is making a significant investment in their hard cider and apple wine production facility and tasting room, Cellars at Royal Farms. The project includes infrastructure upgrades supporting new fermentation and processing line equipment, the retention of four existing jobs, and the creation of two new jobs. With technical assistance from the NLEA, the company was awarded a $100,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rural Development Fund to support 57% of the anticipated project costs.

Community Transformation: Lakeview Lofts

NLEA worked with the City of East Jordan, developers, and engineers to secure a Brownfield Site Assessment through EGLE, helping advance the former East Jordan Civic Center toward redevelopment. This step paved the way for an $805,000 grant to support the costs of demolishing the existing vacant and blighted building to clear the way for Lakefront Lofts, an $8.6 million redevelopment of the site for commercial use and housing. Moving forward, NLEA will continue to work with the City to support the successful implementation of the project.



BUSINESS OUTLOOK

NLEA surveyed business leaders with operations in the region to understand their perception of the local business climate, barriers to success, and economic outlook. Responding businesses represent over 4,000 employees in the region and a variety of industries.

Our Region is a Good Place to Grow Your Business

42% of respondents agreed

Our Region is Improving as a Place to Grow Your Business

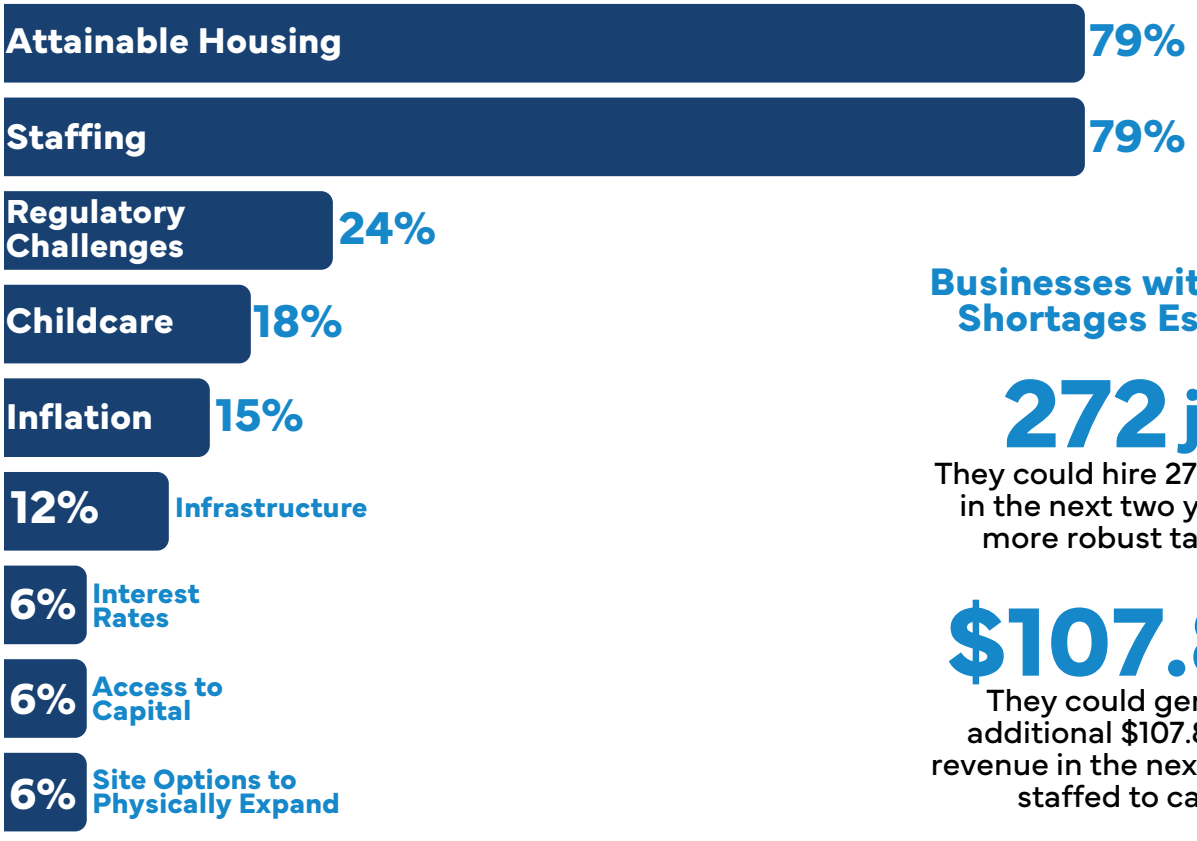
49% of respondents agreed

Perceptions of our regional business climate declined from the Spring EPR but are still within the historical bounds of the past three EPRs. There was an increase in respondents who were neutral on the first statement, increasing from 36% to 48%, implying a tepid view of the regional business climate. The large share of neutral respondents indicates that while there is not a strong negative sentiment, more must be done to improve the region's business climate.

What are the Largest Barriers to Growing Your Business?

Business leaders selected Attainable Housing and Staffing as their top challenges, consistent with previous EPRs. In this fall's survey, a greater share of businesses selected these two barriers, up from 56% and 67% respectively in the Spring EPR. Regulatory Challenges rose to the third most common barrier with respondents mentioning concerns over proposed changes to the federal definition of small businesses, a desire for greater flexibility under state programs, and challenging local building and zoning policies.

Looking forward, 55% of respondents held a positive outlook for their industry, down from the Spring EPR, but 85% reported stable or increasing sales. To support business growth, the NLEA is actively assisting companies with their expansion plans, including navigating local and financial hurdles.



Businesses with Staffing Shortages Estimated:

272 jobs

They could hire 272 employees in the next two years with a more robust talent pool.

$107.8M

They could generate an additional $107.8 million in revenue in the next two years if staffed to capacity.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT OUTLOOK

NLEA surveyed elected and appointed leaders from local units of government across the region to understand their perception of the local business climate, what they consider barriers to success, and desired forms of development.

Your Community is a Good Place to Grow a Business

68% of respondents agreed.

Your Community is Improving as a Place to Grow a Business

64% of respondents agreed.

The survey continues to reveal that local government leaders hold a noticeably more positive perception of the regional business climate than business leaders. When asked to identify barriers to business growth, government leaders identified many of the same barriers to growth as business leaders; staffing, attainable housing, and infrastructure were the top three.

Desired Types of Development in Your Community?

- Workforce Housing — 61%
- Commercial — 49%
- Mixed-Used — 49%
- Affordable Housing — 46%
- Light Industrial — 36%
- 6% Not Interested in Development

The development most public sector leaders are interested in seeing is Workforce Housing, 80% to 120% of Area Median Income, up from 50% in the spring report, with Commercial and Mixed-Use development tied for the second most desirable. The desire for additional housing development aligns with extremely low residential vacancy rates in the region. Local leaders expressed roughly the same level of interest in Light Industrial as in the past two EPRs.

NLEA supports transformational development and infrastructure projects across the region by assisting communities with site selection, financing, and development incentives.



LOCAL ECONOMIC DATA

Employment Data



Labor Force
53,586



Employment
51,335



Unemployment
2,251 (4.2%)

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics: Local Area Unemployment Statistics' preliminary August data

Unemployment Rate



Antrim	Charlevoix	Cheboygan	Emmet
4.5%	3.8%	4.6%	4.1%

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics: Local Area Unemployment Statistics' preliminary August data

Labor Force Snapshot

The region's August labor force increased 2,497 compared to January and the region's August unemployment rate decreased 3.9% compared to January. These diverging trends reflect an annual cycle in the region's economy as more workers—including students, visa workers, and retirees—enter the labor force in a time of peak labor demand. As students return to school and hospitality businesses slow down, the region will see a decrease in the labor force and an increase in the unemployment rate which typically peaks in the winter months.

Building Permits

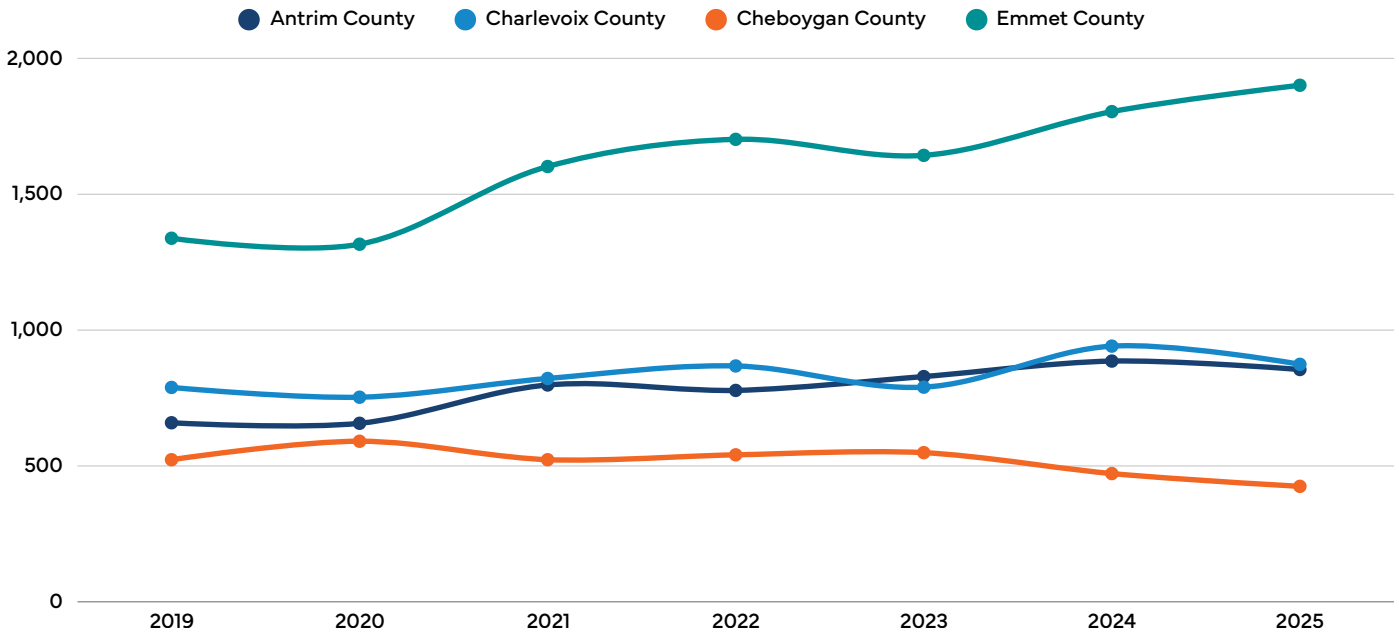


Antrim	Charlevoix	Cheboygan	Emmet
680	720	473	1,520

Total Construction Permits Issued Jan 1 to Sep 30

Source: County Building Departments
*Data includes new construction, additions, alterations, and demolitions.

Six-Year Building Permit Snapshot



Source: County Building Departments
*Data includes new construction, additions, alterations, and demolitions.

NLEA IN ACTION

Responding to Business Needs: Space for Expansion

Based on EPR survey results and NLEA's ongoing business outreach, we know there is an appetite among existing manufacturers to grow. However, available industrial land and infrastructure are limiting those opportunities. To respond to this need, the NLEA secured a $60,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) to conduct a comprehensive market and site readiness analysis of manufacturing growth opportunities across the four-county service area. Supporting this sector is key to the region's economic vitality. While third in terms of employee count, the sector has an outsized impact, producing the greatest share of Gross Regional Product and wages compared to other sectors.

NLEA's work over the past year to identify industrially zoned properties found that nearly all industrial park land in the four-county region is already developed or occupied, while remaining parcels lack adequate infrastructure and require new building construction, which poses additional cost barriers. Additionally, 46% of respondents to the EPR survey stated that they have plans for a physical expansion within the region in the next four years, mostly in the Manufacturing sector. Local manufacturing firms interested in expansion were seeking square footage ranging from 4,000 to 35,000.

The final analysis will give NLEA and local government partners a data-driven roadmap for preparing the region for manufacturing investment. It will include a market overview and trends, supply and demand analysis, location and infrastructure assessments, and forecasts and recommendations. NLEA expects it to serve as a long-term resource for communities across the four counties as they work to attract, retain and grow manufacturing businesses and build a stronger, more diverse regional economy.

> ***Growing manufacturing in Northern Michigan is an all-of-the-above strategy and requires us to work with industry at every level of government to create more opportunities for good-paying jobs. This investment will help communities attract new businesses, strengthen existing manufacturers, and build a stronger economic future.***
> ***– U.S. Senator Elissa Slotkin***

> ***This investment will help our communities identify new opportunities to grow local manufacturing, strengthen critical infrastructure, and create more good-paying, year-round jobs. I'm glad to see NLEA continuing its work to build a stronger and more resilient economy.***
> ***– U.S. Representative Jack Bergman***



Aerial photo by Jack Kozlowski and Calvin Wade



Northern Lakes
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Sign up for our monthly newsletter for more news and insights!

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